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Medical Focus - Avian Flu Essentials

November 30, 2005

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"In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity." - Albert Einstein

Dear Colleague:

In the seventh letter in the Avian Flu Essentials series, I would like to give an overview of the crucial components needed to effectively prevent the development of a pandemic.

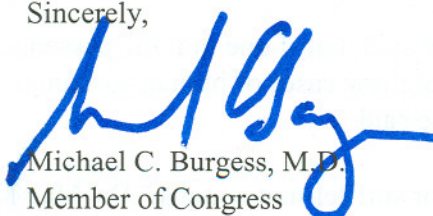
As avian flu is currently an animal disease, measures have to be put in place to keep avian viruses from becoming highly virulent human viruses. Regular testing of poultry can allow scientists to monitor the presence and evolution of viral strains. In addition, educational and training efforts in less developed countries will serve to increase awareness and to institute more sanitary practices in poultry farms, markets, and households. In addition, UNEP, the UN Environment Programme, is currently supporting the creation of a warning system, which would track migratory bird travels, and alert countries of their arrivals.

Ongoing surveillance during the cold season in the United States is already happening in many counties. This surveillance network can easily be adapted during a pandemic to allow communities to take swift action if a pandemic influenza case is identified. At the same time, the national influenza surveillance system includes reporting from health care providers, hospitals, and state health departments. Increasing awareness of emerging health threats and recruiting more participants in surveillance systems can be extremely beneficial. In addition, extra laboratories equipped to determine viral strains are needed so that antiviral treatments can be supplied as needed.

Furthermore, quarantines can certainly help contain and minimize outbreaks. Airport quarantines are useful tools to detect passengers with influenza symptoms. However, these require timely notifications from airline employees and constant watchfulness. Home quarantines or cancellations of community events should also be explored. The general public needs to be educated on the value of quarantines and the types that exist. Most individuals comply voluntarily as long as the community demonstrates that their basic needs would be addressed, such as food and water. A draft report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS, titled "Model Operational Guidelines for Disease Exposure Control" describes quarantines and guides communities on how implement them.

Containment begins at the local level. Progress is being made for early detection as can be seen in articles on the reverse of this letter. Extinguishing outbreaks when they first appear will protect individuals worldwide.

Sincerely,


Michael C. Burgess, M.D.
Member of Congress

Excerpt from UNEP, *Avian Flu Early Warning System Given Green Light*, November 22, 2005

An avian flu early warning system, able to alert countries and communities to the arrival of potentially infected wild birds, is to be developed by an alliance of organizations led by the United Nations.

The system will be designed to alert authorities on different continents that migratory water birds are on their way.

Special maps are to be developed for individual countries pin pointing the precise locations such as lakes, marshes and other wetland areas where the birds are likely to go.

Armed with such information, local health and environment bodies on continents like Africa, Asia and in Latin America will be better able to prioritize their planning and response.

This may include the issuance of advice to vulnerable groups in potential 'hot spot' areas.

Advice may include recommending that farmers move poultry away from key wetlands so as to minimize cross transmission with migratory birds up to hygiene advice to licensed hunters on handling harvested birds.

The warning system, details of which were announced at an international wildlife conference taking place in Nairobi, Kenya, is to be developed by the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) with support and funding from the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

Excerpt from The New York Times, *At Entry Points, on the Lookout for Symptoms*, November 22, 2005

Expanding an old weapon in the struggle against infectious disease, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has opened 10 new quarantine stations at major ports of entry in the past 18 months and plans to add several more in the coming year.

The United States now has medical officers at 17 airports and at the busy border crossing in El Paso to screen people entering the country for communicable diseases. They are particularly alert for travelers showing symptoms of the deadly avian influenza virus that has spread across Asia and into Europe.

The avian flu strain, known as H5N1, has forced the slaughter of millions of chickens and other fowl and has caused 67 human deaths as of late last week, according to the World Health Organization. The virus, while affecting huge numbers of birds, is not yet efficiently transmitted among people. But medical authorities fear that the virus could mutate into a lethal human flu strain and touch off a global pandemic that could kill millions.

Dr. William R. Mac Kenzie, the medical officer at the C.D.C. quarantine station at Los Angeles International Airport, said things were quiet in his small office. He receives one or two reports a week from international airlines reporting passengers with flu-like symptoms. Those travelers are examined and asked about where they had traveled and whether they had contact with live birds.

No such cases have arisen, Dr. Mac Kenzie said, but if one did, the passenger would not be detained but referred to a local hospital. Because there are few cases of human-to-human infection, the remaining passengers on the aircraft would not be quarantined, he said.

"At this point, we're not actively looking for sniffles and coughs," Dr. Mac Kenzie said. "Of course, that could change if there was a change in the transmission pattern and human-to-human infection becomes common."